TJ KLUNE
FERALSONG

Feralsong

A Green Creek Story

By Tj Klune

Author's Note: This is part of a series meant to be read in order, starting with Wolfsong, Ravensong, and Heartsong. If you haven't read all three books, this will spoil major events. You've been warned.

Audio Narration by Kirt Graves (which will also populate on the podcast feed for Lovesong)[: Feralsong Audio]

packpackpack

CARTER

When Carter is lost in a haze of violet, his rage alive and all-consuming, he hears the only voice that matters.

He stands in a clearing, the same one where so much of their history has been decided. His thoughts are angry. He wants to bite and tear and claw until the earth beneath him gushes blood. It's the land of his father, and his father before him. And how he *hates* them, hates them for all they've done, for all the mistakes they've made. Duty called, and they'd answered, not caring who stood in their way, or who they left behind. Carter was too young to understand it when it happened, but he knows it now.

His father is here.

Sometimes he's a wolf, white with black on his chest and back.

Other times, he's a man, a breakable man who watches Carter with knowing eyes.

He tries to speak. He says, "Carter, I know—"

"Shut up, shut up, shut up," Carter chants, hands over his ears. "You're not real, you're not real, you're dead, you *died*, you let him take you, you let him hurt you, why why why, did you do it? Why did you—"

When he opens his eyes again, his father is further away, standing on the other side of the clearing.

Carter runs towards him.

He only makes it halfway before he smashes into an invisible barrier. His breath is knocked from his chest as his nose breaks, blood pouring down onto his lips and into his open mouth. He swallows it down, relishing in the taste as his father watches.

"Tethers," Dad says. "It all comes back to tethers."

Carter screams for him. He begs his father to save him, to love him, to *choose* him.

Dad looks away.

Carter slams his hands against the barrier, knowing his eyes are violet. He doesn't care. All that matters is Dad had known this could happen, had *known* what

his former witch was capable of, and even though he's nothing but swirling motes of dust, Carter wants to wrap his hands around his father's throat and choke the life out of him.

Dad says, "You're more than this."

Carter says, "It was always Joe, wasn't it? He was your favorite. We were your firstborn, but when Joe came, nothing else mattered."

Dad says, "You can beat this. Remember who you are."

Carter says, "I wanted you to love me as much as you loved him. I wanted you to believe in me as much as you did him. Why wasn't I enough?"

Dad says, "This isn't you, Carter. There's something inside you, something rotten, and if you don't fight this, if you don't rise above it, you'll be lost."

Carter snarls, "Pack pack pack. You put the pack above everything else. Pack and Joe. Pack and Joe. Mom didn't want it. Gordo didn't want you to leave him behind. Mark didn't want to be taken from his mate. And then there was Ox. He was a *child*. He didn't know what you were asking of him, what you made him into. How could you do that to him? How could you let it happen? His mother *died* because of you. Because of your war. How could you look him in the eyes? How could you even *breathe* knowing what you'd done? You're a monster. A beast. You're no better than Richard Collins. Or Elijah. Or Robert Livingstone. When Joe was taken, you moved heaven and earth to get to him. But where are you now? *Why aren't you here to save me?* " The last word comes as a roar torn from his throat, and it echoes in the forest around them: *me me me*.

His father smiles sadly. "I would do anything for you. I would—"

"Carter."

He whirls around, claws digging into his palm, breaking the skin.

Kelly stands there, in the clearing. His eyes are wide, face pale. He watches his brother, and oh, is he *scared*. Carter can taste it, burning, burning. He glances back over his shoulder, but Dad is gone.

“Carter.”

He grins as he turns slowly back to his brother. His fangs drop, shredding his bottom lip. “Kelly. What a surprise.”

“I’m here,” Kelly says, taking a step toward him, his hands in fists at his sides.

“I’m here to bring you back. To take you home. Everyone is waiting for you. We love you.”

He laughs bitterly. “You’re not real.”

Kelly takes another step. “I am. You’re trapped here. Because of the infection.

Because of what they did to you.”

“Gordo. He made me this way.”

Kelly looks stricken. “Not the way you think.”

“Go away.”

“I’m not leaving you here.”

Carter glares at him. “There’s nowhere else for me to go. Can’t you see? This is who I am, *this* is who I’m meant to be. I don’t need you. I don’t want you.”

Kelly’s expression stutters. “You can’t…no. I won’t let you do this. This isn’t you. It’s the magic in you. It’s destroying you. Ox is holding on as best he can, but he can’t do it alone. He needs you. *I* need you.”

“He lies,” another voice whispers, and Carter turns his head to see *another* Carter standing next to him. His eyes are violet, face hard, mouth twisted. Carter thinks, *hello, my old friend*. “He’ll say anything to get what he wants.”

“Yeah,” Carter says, and he’s *panting*. “He would, wouldn’t he?” He looks back at Kelly. “Just like the others.”

Omega Carter smiles a terrible smile. “Exactly. Stay with me. Nothing hurts here. Nothing can ever disappoint you.”

“No,” Kelly says, and when he squares his shoulders, Carter remembers when they were kids, just the two of them, and they were running through the forest.

Kelly yelled at Carter to wait, Carter, wait, I can’t run as fast as you, I’m not like you.

And Carter *had* waited, because the very idea of leaving his brother behind made his head hurt. Kelly was gasping when he caught up with his brother, sweat on his forehead. Carter told him that one day, he would be just as fast, one day, he would be *faster*, and he’d said really, Carter? You really think so?

“Yeah, Kelly. I know it.”

He grinned—wide and beautiful—as he puffed out his chest. “I’ll be brave too. Just like you.”

Carter picked him up, spinning him around, his scent warm as he laughed and laughed and laughed, and Carter knew he’d do anything for Kelly, knew he’d never let him go—

“Pretty thoughts,” Omega Carter whispers, sliding his arm around Carter’s neck, pulling him close. His breath is hot against Carter’s ear. “But he didn’t stop this from happening, did he? He let Gordo break you. He stood by as the witch all but *fed* you to the Omega.” He sighs. “You heal, but you’re covered in scars, aren’t you? All of you are. You fight and you fight, and for what? A moment of peace?

Where does that get you? It’s always shattered when the next big bad thing comes to town, bringing death and destruction to all you hold dear. Aren’t you tired of it all? Aren’t you just *exhausted*? If you stay with me, you won’t have to worry about it ever again. I’ll keep you safe.”

He wants that. More than anything. “You promise?”

Carter feels his double smiling against his cheek. “I promise.”

And then Kelly says, “I can’t do this without you” and the violet parts, a ray of sun beaming through thick clouds.

Omega Carter is gone.

Only the two brothers remain.

Kelly’s eyes are wet, and there’s a lurch in Carter’s chest, a sharp hook that pierces his heart and *yanks*.

Carter says, “Why are you crying?”

Kelly says, “Because I’m sad.”

Carter says, “Please don’t be sad. Please. I can’t take it. I hate it. I *hate* it.”

He wipes his eyes. “I can’t help it. This hurts me, Carter. Seeing you like this.

This isn’t you.”

“Maybe it is. Maybe this is who I was always meant to be.”

Kelly shakes his head. “No. You’re supposed to be with me. You’re supposed to be my big brother. We protect each other. It’s always been that way. Why would you want to leave me?”

Carter flinches.

Kelly takes another step, reaching up, pressing his hand flat against the barrier. He winces as if it hurts him as the air beneath his hand ripples like liquid. It hurts him, but he doesn't pull away. He doesn't stand down.

"Stop!" Carter shouts at him. "Don't do this, why are you doing this, stop, just *stop*."

"No," he says through gritted teeth. "Not until you come with me." Then, "Gordo says there's a door. It always comes back to doors."

He brings his other hand up and presses it against the barrier. He screams in pain as the muscles in his arms quiver.

"Bite him," Omega Carter whispers from somewhere behind him. "Bite him. Bring him in here with you. That way, he'll be safe. That way, you'll be together."

And for a moment, doesn't Carter listen?

He does. Here, in this place, nothing could ever hurt them again. He doesn't want to go out there, back into the real world. But Kelly…Kelly could come in here with *him*.

He would be safe too, and they could stay here forever, together, just the two of them.

He stands in front of Kelly, who smiles though it's tenuous. He presses his hands against his brother's, a thin whisper of magic the only thing separating them. The beat of Kelly's heart is thunderous.

It'd be so easy.

If there is a door, it'd work both ways.

"If that's what you want," Kelly says quietly. "I'll stay with you."

A door appears between them.

Omega Carter howls, the sound angry and loud.

“It’s easy,” Kelly says, “to give in. To let it overtake you. But it isn’t real. It’ll always be a lie. Real is waking up every day and forcing yourself out of bed, even when your body aches. Real is knowing the only peace we’ll have is when we take it for ourselves. Real is you, Carter. You and me. I know it’s scary. I know it hurts. If you want to stay here, then I’m staying with you. I can’t do this without you.” He looks at Carter through the door shimmering between them. “I want us to be real.”

Carter does too. He loves this man who has followed him into the dark. He would do anything he asked.

And with that thought, the door solidifies.

Carter pushes through it, hearing the furious snarl of the Omega behind him.

Kelly’s hand wraps around his wrist, and he *pulls* with all his strength. As Carter passes through the doorway, he’s being torn in two, and he screams and screams and *screams* until—

“I’ve got you,” Kelly whispers in his ear. “I’ve got you, I’ve got you, hold on to—”

KELLY

“—me,” Kelly says. “Hold on to me. As tightly as you can. I know it hurts. I know what it feels like. But we’ll find him. We’ll find him and bring him home.”

Carter doesn’t speak, his head against Kelly’s chest. He thinks about the unfairness of it all. He finally has Robbie back, all of him, every piece and part. They might not be who they once were, but they’re together, and Robbie *remembers* him, remembers all they mean to each other. It’s a start.

And Carter.

He has Carter.

His eyes are orange once more, the Omega magic that had consumed him gone, gone, gone, but at what cost?

Because though the violet has faded from Carter’s eyes, it has been replaced by something equally as terrible: knowledge of what has been before him the entire time, within his grasp, now gone away, following a beast that should not exist.

Carter clutches at him, his head against Kelly’s chest. He shakes as he breaks apart, and Kelly’s eyes burn as he struggles to remain in control. Carter needs him.

He has to be the strong one now. He owes his brother this much at least.

“I’m here,” he whispers. “I promise.” He rubs Carter’s back, something their mother used to do to them when they were younger. He doesn’t know if it’s helping, but he doesn’t know what else to do. He wants to tear the world apart for being so unfair, for putting the weight of everything upon their shoulders once more. Don’t they deserve peace? Don’t they deserve to have one fucking day where they can just…be?

It’s always something. Always a battle to be fought, always blood to be spilled. People looking at them to lead, to protect, to make everything all right. But what about *them*? Who’s supposed to protect *them*?

“I love you,” Kelly says. “I know we don’t say that as much as we should, but I do. More than anything.”

Carter laughs wetly against his chest. “More than Robbie?”

“No,” Kelly says. “Just…differently.” He thinks of Robbie in their room. Kelly had left him in their bed, barely able to look away from him, sure the moment he did, Robbie would disappear again. He’s had a hard time convincing himself this isn’t a dream, that Robbie is really here. He never wants to go through that again.

He can’t. He won’t. If anything—Livingstone or some other monster—tries to touch Robbie again, it’ll be the last thing they do. Kelly will make sure of it.

Carter rubs his face against Kelly’s shirt. They’re sitting on the porch, Kelly’s back against the side of the house near the door, Carter laying between his splayed legs. It’s cold, but Carter’s warm, and he’ll stay with his brother for as long as he needs it.

“I don’t know what to do,” Carter whispers. “I should’ve done more. I should have fought harder. I didn’t know. Kelly, I didn’t *know*.”

Gavin.

Gavin Livingstone, the feral wolf who’d fought against the poison coursing through his veins when he saw what his father was about to do to Carter. When a storm of furious magic had been roaring around them, it’d been Gavin who’d saved them all. For want of a kingdom, the battle was lost, and it’d been Gavin who’d sacrificed himself in order to ensure the man he’d followed like a shadow had survived.

Kelly had seen the look on Gavin’s face, in that last moment before he’d followed the beast over the walls of Caswell into the woods. Whatever

Gavin had said had been a lie: he didn't want to leave. He wanted to stay, and not just with the pack.

With Carter.

"We'll find him," Kelly whispers in the dark. "We'll find him."

His words feel hollow.

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Later (not knowing that it's already *too* late, and he'll replay it over and over again in his mind, wishing he'd said more, had done *more*), he pulls a promise out of Carter that he'll try and get some sleep. He leads Carter up the stairs by the hand, pulling him up to his room. It smells like the timber wolf in Carter's room, a ghost that haunts the darkened corners. It's etched into the carpet, into the walls, but especially on the bed, as if he'd just been there. He thinks about telling Carter to take one of the spare rooms, but Carter's already asleep by the time his head hits the pillow. Kelly pulls the comforter up to his chest, brushing a lock of hair off

Carter's forehead. He wishes Joe was here. Joe, the boy who would be king. He's in Caswell, doing what only he can do. They need their Alpha. Ox could do in a pinch, but it's not the same.

He leaves the bedroom door open a crack before wandering down the hall where Robbie sleeps in their bed.

Except he's not sleeping. He's awake. Of course he is.

He blinks slowly as Kelly closes the door behind him. He leans against it, taking in the sight of Robbie Fontaine yawning so widely, his jaw cracks. He opens his mouth to say something soft and joking ("My, what big teeth you have"), but he's startled when the words collapse into a sob. Just one, his breath hitching, eyes closing tightly against the sting, but it's there all the same. There's nothing he can do to stop it.

Robbie's up and out of the bed as he starts to sag against the door, and a moment later, Kelly's surrounded by Robbie, Robbie, Robbie, and he breathes him in, taking in a great, gasping breath, the scents of *home* filling his lungs. Once upon a terrible time, he thought he'd never have this again, sure that he'd never find Robbie again, that he was gone forever, and it'd broken him even as he tried to stay strong. The others had been confused, Rico telling everyone who would listen that Robbie *betrayed* them, that he'd almost killed Tanner and Chris, and they should have seen it coming, should have known Robbie was a traitor. For a brief, awful moment, Kelly had believed that too. He'd seen the blood, had heard the way Chris's heart had stopped, silence filling his chest until he'd been saved by the bite of an angry Alpha.

But only for a moment.

Because he *knew* Robbie, better than anyone.

And for a long while, he'd stood alone in his belief.

The others had come around, eventually. Kelly wasn't sure if he'd forgiven them for that yet or not. It felt too big, too soon.

"Hey," Robbie says, sounding alarmed. Kelly leans his forehead against Robbie's shoulder, struggling to calm himself. "Hey, it's okay. I'm here. I've got you.

Hey, hey. Kelly. Kelly, shh. It's okay."

It's not. It hasn't been for a long time.

He says, "I hate this."

"Me too." Then, "What do we hate?"

Kelly laughs. He doesn't mean to. It's unexpected, but then everything about Robbie Fontaine is unexpected. From the moment he'd seen him for the first time—

a stranger standing with the pack on the porch of the house like he *belonged* there—Kelly hadn't known what to make of him. Oh, he knew what he was the moment he laid eyes on him, but Kelly had just spent three years on the road chasing after the monster that had murdered their father, and he didn't want to deal with it. He didn't want this. Want *him*.

But Robbie had carved a place for himself in Kelly's heart when he wasn't looking. He doesn't know when it happened, exactly: the moment he looked upon Robbie with anything more than distrust and a vague sense of unease that he couldn't explain. Robbie had been so…earnest, in ways that seemed naïve at first. It wasn't until Kelly realized that Robbie caused his heart to skip a beat or two just by walking into a room that he knew he was in trouble.

If only he'd known then what he knows now. He would've given into it so much sooner.

He lifts his head from Robbie's shoulder. Robbie smiles quietly at him, thumbs brushing against Kelly's wet cheeks. "Hi," he says.

"Hi," Kelly replies, and he doesn't know how he'd survived when Robbie was gone.

"Carter?"

Kelly nods. "I don't know what to do. I don't know how to help him. It's… it's like it was before. When he turned feral. I'm losing him. And I don't know how to stop it."

Robbie sighs, leaning his forehead against Kelly's. "Gavin."

"Yeah."

"Any news?"

"No. They've just…disappeared." He swallows thickly. "Like you did."

Robbie's eyes flash, bright in the darkness. "I'm here. I won't leave you again.

Not ever.”

He can’t promise that. None of them can. But Kelly doesn’t care. “Say it again.”

“I won’t leave you,” Robbie says. “Never, ever, ever.” He kisses Kelly’s cheek, his chin, the tip of his nose. “You’re stuck with me.”

“Forever.”

“Forever,” Robbie says, and it’s a song that reverberates through Kelly’s bones.

He allows Robbie to pull him toward their bed. He stops next to it, raising his arms when Robbie tells him to, his shirt lifted up and over his head before falling to the floor. Hands fumbled with the drawstring of his sleep pants, and it’s not sexual.

It’s not hurried or frenzied. It’s loving, and kind, and all he’s ever wanted. He closes his eyes as Robbie kisses the scar on his neck and shoulder, the perfect indentation of fangs that he’ll carry with him for the rest of his life. When Robbie had been gone, there were days Kelly stood in front of a mirror, looking at the scar in his reflection, memorizing each groove with the tip of his finger. Kelly hears Robbie thrumming through the bond between them, and it’s *LoveMateKelly,* clean and pure.

He lays on the bed. Robbie crawls in after him, plastering himself to Kelly’s back, arm slung over his hip. The heat of him is like fire, and Kelly thinks it’d be a pleasure to burn.

Robbie says, “You know what it’s like for him. I do too, in my own way.”

Kelly nods, not trusting himself to speak. He thinks he’d break again, and he’s too tired for that now.

“I didn’t know it,” Robbie whispers. “Not for a long time. And when the truth came out, I didn’t want to believe it. It meant…it meant everything I thought I knew was a lie. It meant I had a life that had been stolen from me.

It was easier to believe you were all fucking with my head than to believe the truth. Ezra…" Then, harder,

"*Livingstone* knew what he was doing. He knew where to dig. Where it would hurt the most. I hate him."

"But you still love him too," Kelly says, and though he tries to hide it, his voice his harsh.

"I don't know," Robbie admits. "Ezra was…my friend. It was a lie, yeah, but part of me wants to believe there's still good in him, even if I know better now.

Everything he's done, everything he took from me, it's…unforgiveable. If I had any hope in him, it died the moment he hurt you and Rico." His breath is warm against the back of Kelly's neck. "And now, there's Gavin. He's…"

"One of us."

"He is. He doesn't belong to Livingstone. He's taken from us for the last time.

We're going to find them. We're going to get Gavin back. We're going to end Livingstone." He's quiet for a moment. Then, "How do you think he did it? How did he beat back his father's magic?"

"I don't know. But he did it for Carter. Everything he's done has been for Carter, and we can't let that be the end. We *can't*."

"We won't," Robbie says, hand flat against Kelly's stomach. "We'll find them.

We'll find them both. And once it's over with, we'll be together. All of us. And nothing will ever hurt us again."

"Robbie?"

"Yeah?"

“I love you.”

“I know,” Robbie says. “And I’ll never forget it again.”

“Never ever?”

“Never ever.”

“I’m scared,” Kelly whispers.

“Me too,” Robbie says in the dark. “But as long as we’re together, we’ll find our way home.”

And it’s this thought he has a few weeks later when Carter shatters his heart into a thousand pieces: *As long as we’re together, we’ll find our way home*. He watches as the shell of his brother appears on the screen in a recorded video, the bonds between them broken, Carter telling him that he can’t breathe, and he thinks, *Robbie said the same thing*. But then it’s lost in a wave of blue, blue, blue, the grief vast and wild. He knows now. He knows what Carter and Mark had felt while caught in the grips of Livingstone’s magic. He’s fucking *feral* with it, a song being sung in his head that won’t leave.

As he screams for his brother in the falling snow, howling him home, he wonders if their father is listening. *Your fault*, he thinks, his howl a thunderous sound that echoes in the forest around them. *This is all your fault. Where are you, you fucking bastard? Where are you now? We need you, we need you and you’re* gone .

Robbie says, “We’ll find him. I promise. We’ll find him.”

Kelly closes his eyes and searches for his tether in the frayed, ragged remains of the bonds between them. Nothing. There’s nothing.

Because Carter is gone.

Gone.

Gone.

JOE

He says, “I am Joseph Bennett. My father was Thomas Bennett. My grandfather was Abel Bennett. I have their strength within me, and that of all those who came before me. We are pack. I know you’re scared. I know that uncertainty lies ahead. We have much to do. But we’ll do it together because we’re the goddamn Bennett pack, and our song will always be heard.”

The people of Caswell, Maine, all bare their necks to him.

The Alpha of all.

And he wishes for anything but.

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“A king,” his father says. “One day, you will be king.”

“Why?” he asks.

“Because it is the way of things.” Dad takes him by the hand, leading him into the woods. Joe glances back at the house, wishing Ox was home from school. His brothers too, sure, but mostly Ox. So long as he doesn’t bring that girl with him again. Jessie. She’s nice, and she makes Ox smile, but Joe wishes she’d go away and never come back.

Joseph Bennett is eleven years old, and he doesn’t want to be king. He wants to be like Carter. Like Kelly. Like Ox. Normal. He doesn’t want to hear that he’s going to be more, that something in him is different to what lays inside his brothers. Being told he will be Alpha is one thing. He doesn’t yet believe it, not like his father does.

“It’s a burden,” his father says as they walk amongst the trees. It’s different, here.

It’s not like it was in Caswell. The earth beneath their feet sings to them in ways it never had in Maine. This is where they belong. He doesn’t know how his father could stand being away from it for so long. “I won’t lie to

you about that. Heavy is the head that wears the crown. But I know you'll meet whatever challenges you face."

He doesn't mean to say what he says next. It's lurking in the back of his mind, flitting about like a little bird. He opens his mouth to agree with his father (he's learned the quicker he does, the sooner they'd be done), but instead, he says, "What if I don't want to?"

Dad stops, looking down at him, brow furrowed. "What was that?"

Joe's face grows hot as he looks down at his shoes. He scuffs at the dirt and grass.

"Never mind."

Dad squeezes his hand. "Joseph."

He sighs in that way his mother says is a Bennett trait, whatever that means. "I just…" He frowns, trying to put his thoughts in order. He doesn't want to hurt his father. He wants him to understand. "What if I'm not good at it?"

"That's why you have me," Dad says.

"I know. But it's not…" He shakes his head. "I want to be like everyone else. But I'm not."

"No," Dad says. "You're not. That's not a bad thing, Joe."

Of course Dad doesn't think it is. Being Alpha is all he's known for a long time. Joe knows a lot of their history, though he thinks his parents have left the scary parts out. Death and blood and wars for territory, Dad had been made Alpha before he was supposed to be. He'd risen to the challenge and turned out okay, but Joe doesn't think he could do the same. Thankfully, he won't have to find out until he's older.

Much, much older when he's grown up and ready for such things, if it happens at all.

Though he knows it's not possible, he wonders if Dad could live forever so he wouldn't have to be Alpha. A small part of him *wants* to be, but only because he'll be able to tell Carter and Kelly what to do. Everything else sounds frightening.

He says, "I know. But I…Carter would make a better Alpha than me. He's bigger and stronger." Carter would probably shit a brick that Joe was throwing him under the bus, but he's not here, so he'll never know. "Not smarter," he adds, because he doesn't want Dad to think less of him.

"You are pretty smart," Dad agrees, lips quirking as if he finds something funny.

"Right?" Joe exclaims. "I mean, Carter has *some* smarts, but he can be pretty dumb about a lot of things." He narrows his eyes at his father. "You can't tell him I said that. He'll chase me, and since I can't shift yet, he'll tackle me and slobber on my face." He grimaces. "I hate it when he does that."

"A terrible thing," Dad says gravely. "Your secret is safe with me." He looks off into the trees. Joe follows his gaze, wondering what he sees, and if Joe could ever see the same. Yes, the territory is thrumming beneath their feet, but it's just trees and leaves and grass and dirt. He doesn't know if he'll ever see what his father does.

He's not sure if he wants to. It feels too big, something he'll never have the strength to carry.

He thinks of Ox, always. Ox, with that quiet way he smiles. The way he speaks. The way he listens to Joe like no one else. Carter has Kelly, and maybe that doesn't always feel fair. If he's being honest with himself, he's jealous of them. Oh, he knows they love him, knows they would move Heaven and Earth for him, but there are days when he feels like he's on the outside looking in. Part of it has to do with the fact only two years separate them, and Joe came later.

They're also each other's tethers. Joe could never measure up to that.

But Joe has Ox, now, even if he has to share him with Jessie. He doesn't like her, but he's aware enough to know that it has nothing to do with her as a person. She laughs, and she makes Ox happy, so of *course* Joe should like her. But she takes Ox away from him, distracts him, and Joe knows he's being mean about it, feels the dark burn of shame when he thinks such things, but he can't help it. He found Ox first, all on his own. He remembers being in the woods, catching a scent that he'd never smelled before. It lit him up from the inside out, and for the first time in a long time, he felt like *talking*, felt like opening his mouth and *saying words*, something that hadn't happened since the bad wolf had stolen him away and bent his fingers back until they broke. He'd screamed so loud that his voice was lost, and even when his father found him, he didn't feel like talking. He didn't have anything to say.

Until Ox.

Seeing him standing on the road—a big boy who smelled like candy canes and pinecones, like epic and awesome—had been a revelation. A dam had burst in Joe's chest, everything had spilled from him in a swirling tornado of words. He hadn't known what it meant. Not then. He isn't sure he understands it entirely now.

But Ox is Ox, and Joe will do anything for him. Even if it means watching him hold hands with Jessie. He smells like her, sometimes. Joe does his best to cover the scent with his own.

He says, "I wish I could be like you." He does and he doesn't. It's not lying, not in any way that his father will be able to hear a traitorous stutter in his heart, but it's not quite the truth. He doesn't know how else to put it, so he doesn't say anything else.

Dad looks at him, surprised. "But then you wouldn't be like *you*, and that's the most important thing, Joe. You'll become your own man. My job is to give you the tools, to guide you for what lies ahead. What you do with them is a decision you'll have to make on your own. Though not *completely* alone. You'll have Carter and Kelly."

"But you'll be there too, right?" Joe asks. "You're not going anywhere?"

Dad laughs. “There is no place I’d rather be than by your side. The day that you become the Alpha will be the greatest day of my life, because you’ll be better at it than I could ever be. I can’t wait to see what you do with it. So, no. I’m not going anywhere.”

It’s a promise he’ll keep until he doesn’t.

*****

When he tears Richard Collin’s head from his shoulders, Joseph Bennett knows what it means to be feral.

He wishes he’d done it slower, to make the beast feel every inch of the suffering he’d caused.

But it’s over in an instant.

Or so he thinks.

He doesn’t know then that it’s only just begun.

*****

He watches as his mother heals, as his brothers heal, as Ox becomes the Alpha he was always meant to be. He thinks Dad knew what Ox would turn into. He hates his father for it. He blames himself. If he’d never found Ox on that road, had never climbed onto his back to get his scent on Ox, maybe Maggie would still be alive.

He keeps this bottled up inside.

*****

When Carter and Mark become infected, their eyes alight with violet rage, he wants to tear the world apart.

He doesn’t.

He’s the Alpha. He must stay in control.

Dad taught him that.

He watches as Kelly sobs as Carter turns feral, and he's surprised when Kelly doesn't want Mom, doesn't want Robbie, doesn't want Ox.

He wants Joe.

He comes to Joe then while their brother prowls in the basement below them.

He doesn't speak, his expression stricken, bottom lip wobbling. Joe does the only thing he can: he opens his arms. Kelly collapses against him, trembling.

"I'll fix this," Joe whispers into his hair.

He's the Alpha.

It's his job.

*****

Robbie's gone.

Robbie's gone, and Chris and Tanner are wolves.

He's the Alpha.

He tries to hold his pack together as best he can.

*****

After, always after.

After the battle in Caswell.

After the death of Michelle Hughes.

After the death and resurrection of Robert Livingstone.

After a moment of peace where Carter and Mark have turned from Omega to Beta.

After one of their own disappeared with the great and terrible beast, saving them all.

After, always after.

After everything, Joe looks upon the crowd of wolves and witches gathered before him, the ruins of their town smoking around them, and watches as they bare their throats to him. The power he feels then is immense, and it *hurts*, it hurts in ways he did not expect.

Heavy is the head that wears the crown, he thinks, even as he wishes it was anyone else.

*****

He doesn't see it coming.

He doesn't know why.

He's the Alpha.

He's the Alpha of all.

He should've known what was in the secret heart of Carter Bennett, should've known what losing what had been in front of him all along would do to him. In hindsight, Joe knows that if it'd been Ox, he would've done the same. He would've followed him into the dark, no matter the cost.

Which is why he's so surprised (and yet not) when Carter does exactly that.

As Carter's video ends, as Kelly bursts outside, howling and screaming for their brother, Joe wonders if they'll ever have peace, if they'll ever be happy, or if it will always be *something* wanting to take and take and take. And, in the darkest parts of him, he wonders why Carter didn't leave a message for him like he did for Kelly. It's feral, this thought, an angry song that pulses like an infection.

He bows his head as Kelly's cries echo in the forest, the snow beginning to fall.

*****

He leaves them behind as he runs in the woods on four legs, his wolf brain in overdrive. He chases the scent of his lost brother, but to no avail. He's gone, and there's a gaping hole where Carter should be.

He ends up in the clearing. He shifts, his heated body smoking in the cold winter air. He's on his hands and knees, gagging toward the snow, a thin trail of spittle hanging from his mouth. Bile rises. He swallows it back down. He lifts his head, eyes flashing like fire.

"Where are you?" he whispers, and it's not a question meant for Carter.

"Where are you?"

There is no answer.

He pushes himself up. Everything hurts. He staggers but manages to stay upright. He raises his voice. "You promised. You promised me you'd always be here.

Where the fuck are you now!" By the end, he's shouting.

Birds take flight, their songs filled with warning.

"You did this," he says bitterly. "This is because of *you*. You and your goddamn secrets. You and your belief in the good in people. It blinded you. You couldn't see what was right in front of you. All of them, all of the dead. It's your fault." He fists his hair, pulling until his eyes water. "I never wanted this! I never *asked* for this. You did this to me, you made me into this…this *thing*. I don't want to be king. I don't want to be what you *told* me I had to be."

He whirls around, scanning the edges of the clearing. He's haunted, but he sees no ghosts. He remembers his mother's story, of her dream that wasn't a dream.

She said it’d been a gift from the territory. Their father had come to her when she needed him most.

Joe screams, “*Dad! Where are you! ”*

Nothing.

He puts his face in his hands and cries.

He startles when a hand falls on his shoulder, the grip tight and warm.

He lifts his head, the word *Dad* on the tip of his tongue.

But it’s not Thomas Bennett.

It’s his second born.

Kelly.

Kelly, whose eyes are sunken and bloodshot, whose mouth is turned down, whose face is pale. Kelly, who pulls Joe against him, face buried in Joe’s neck, breathing, breathing, chest hitching.

Joe is stunned, but only for a moment. He lifts his arms and wraps them around his brother, clutching at him.

“I couldn’t find you,” Kelly mutters. “I couldn’t find you, I turned around and you were gone too, you can’t do that, you can’t do that to me, Joe, you *can’t*.”

Joe says, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I thought I could find him, and we wouldn’t hurt so bad. I can’t fix it, I don’t know how to fix it, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

They cry together, there, in the clearing.

*****

When the worst of it is over, when they can speak without breaking, Kelly pulls back, though he doesn't let Joe go. He looks as exhausted as Joe feels. They need to sleep. They need rest before they figure out what to do next.

He's about to tell Kelly to go back to the house when Kelly says, "He's gone, Joe. Carter's gone. I tried to make him hear me, but he's gone."

It threatens to set Joe off all over again, but he swallows it down. He's the Alpha. This wolf is his Beta. He is the king, and he must protect what's his. "I know.

We'll find him." Then, "Why are you out here? Why aren't you with the others?"

Kelly frowns. "Because you're here."

Joe blinks. "I don't understand."

"It hurts, Joe," Kelly says, voice cracking. "Everything hurts. I don't know what to do."

Joe sees it now. Kelly is following his instinct. He's in pain, and he needs his Alpha to make it better. It's bitter, this realization, but he lets it go. "Wasn't Ox there?" Ox could have done what Joe could. Kelly didn't need to come all the way out here. And if not Ox, then at the very least, Robbie.

But then Kelly says, "I don't want Ox. I don't want Robbie. I don't want any of them right now. I want *you*. You're the only one who'll understand. You're the only one I want."

Joe closes his eyes. "I thought…"

Kelly jostles him slightly. "I don't care if you're the Alpha. I don't *care* about any of that. Joe, I never did. I don't need an Alpha. I need my brother. Of course I'd come to you. There's no one else. I need you. Which is how I know you need me."

Something inside Joe shifts as he opens his eyes. He's on display, cracked open wide, all that had been hidden in shadow now dragged out into the

light. The infection still pulses, but it’s not as terminal as it’d been only moments before.

“You…need me?”

“I love you,” Kelly says, eyes wet and shining. “Of course I need you. I couldn’t do this without you. I can’t think, Joe. I can’t think. I don’t know what to do. Help me.

Oh, please, won’t you help me?” He’s crying again, pitiful sounds broken by soft hiccups. Joe gathers him up as best he can, his chin resting on the top of Kelly’s head.

After it passes, Kelly says hoarsely, “He’s so stupid.”

Joe chuckles, blinking against the burn. “So stupid.”

“I mean, Christ. What the hell was he thinking?”

“What we would,” Joe says, and it’s the truth. “When it was Ox, when it was Robbie, we did the same. We did anything and everything.”

“We have to find him.”

“We will,” Joseph Bennett says, and he means it.

He’s not his father.

He will keep his promises.

*****

They walk toward home, hand in hand.

He’s not surprised when Ox meets them halfway. Kelly squeezes his hand and leaves them be.

Ox says, “Hey, Joe.”

Joe says, “You can’t ever leave me. You can’t ever disappear. I’ll kill you if you do. I’ll hunt you down and make you bleed.” It’s an awful thing to say, but he means it.

Ox says, “Come here.”

Joe goes. Of course he does.

He stops in front of Ox. He feels so small.

Ox presses a finger underneath his chin, lifting his head. Joe can only see a swirl of red and violet, and it fills the world. In his head, he hears Ox say *JoeJoeJoe i i i will always be with you.*

And Joe believes him.

He kisses Ox with everything he has. Ox gathers him up in his arms, and he thinks, *You are the reason I found my way out of the dark. It’s you. It will always be you.*

GAVIN

There is only wolf.

Feral.

Angry.

Bite, the wolf thinks. *Bite. Kill.*

The bitch. The hunter-bitch. She hurts the wolf. She cuts him. She says, “I will break you, pet. I will break you.”

No, the wolf thinks.

But he’s wrong.

*****

The chain around his neck is heavy. It’s silver and burns his skin.

The wolf wants it gone, but he’s too weak to break it himself.

“Hunt them,” the hunter-bitch says. “Find them and kill them.”

Kill, he thinks. *Kill. Kill. Kill.*

Scent.

On the wind.

It’s—

Mine, the wolf thinks. *Mine. Mine. Mine.*

He hunts.

He finds.

But he does not kill.

When the hunter-bitch dies, he howls a feralsong, savage and loud.

*****

The man-boy-child is an idiot.

Even the wolf knows this, and he’s feral.

The man-boy-child is loud. Brash. Stupid. His name is Carter. It’s a stupid name.

He almost gets himself killed time and time again.

He needs the wolf. He needs the wolf to protect him.

The wolf growls at the others when they get too close.

Carter—Stupid Carter—says, “Don’t do that. Stop. You know them.”

The wolf does know them. But he doesn’t care. He doesn’t like when Stupid Carter smells like them. It covers his own scent like he wasn’t there at all.

He gets revenge by pissing in Stupid Carter’s room.

Rolling on his bed. His clothes.

Stupid Carter yells at him.

The wolf yawns smugly and goes to sleep.

*****

The witch.

Gordo.

He’s…familiar.

The wolf doesn’t like it.

Gordo says, “Oh, fuck off, you mangy mutt. You don’t scare me.”

The wolf bares his fangs.

Gordo rolls his eyes.

The wolf likes him. A little bit. But he will kill him if he gets too close to Stupid Carter. He will kill anyone.

Maybe even Stupid Carter.

*****

The woman. The lovely woman who sings.

Elizabeth.

He watches her. He doesn’t know what to make of her at first. She seems kind, but others who have hurt him were kind too, at first. She doesn’t threaten him.

He’s wary, but he watches her.

He finds her one day, painting, painting, painting. She’s singing. He doesn’t know the words, but he likes it. It makes his ears twitch, his stomach twist. She sees him. She smiles. “Hello.”

He grumbles at her. It’s not a threat, but it could be.

Her smile widens as she turns back to the canvas.

She’s quiet for a long moment, and he’s thinking she’s forgotten he’s there. He lays down on the floor, pretending to sleep. But then she says, “He doesn’t know.”

He lifts his head from his paws.

She doesn't look at him. "He will. Give him time."

He doesn't know what she's talking about, but it doesn't matter because she's singing again.

*****

Stupid Carter says, "You can shift back. If you want."

The wolf ignores him.

"Please."

The wolf yawns.

"You suck, dude. Like, so much."

He nudges against Stupid Carter's hand. Stupid Carter sighs and rubs between the wolf's ears.

The wolf thumps his tail, head resting in Carter's lap. He goes to sleep. For the first time since he can remember, he feels safe.

*****

"Gavin," the bad witch says. "Gavin."

He listens.

And Stupid Carter says, "*No*."

*****

He knows.

Some part of the wolf knows what Stupid Carter is. It's not clear in his head, the wolf brain in control, but he knows. When Stupid Carter curls

around him, the wolf wants to bite him until he bleeds.

He doesn't.

But it's close.

*****

They fight.

They fight.

They fight.

But it's not until the bad witch (*fatherfatherfather*) has Stupid Carter by the hair, Stupid Carter bleeding, bleeding, that the wolf has had enough.

Magic is growing around them, the storm harsh, the *packpackpack* laid out on the ground. Stupid Carter blinks as the bad witch (*fatherfatherfather*) raises him off the ground.

No, the wolf thinks. *No. No. Nononono—*

The pain of the shift is exquisite, blinding and terrible. His muscles tear, his bones break, but he's thinking *Carter* and *no* and *mine mine mine*, and then he's on two legs for the first time in years, a snarl in his throat, and he lifts the bad witch by the fucking *face* and growls, "Don't. Touch. *Him*."

Father, he thinks with a crystal clarity.

Carter, he thinks with a dawning realization.

But it's not enough.

The bad witch dies.

And then is reborn, a beast rising from the wreckage.

They lose.

Gavin—the feral wolf and perhaps the most human of them all—does the only thing he can: he protects his pack.

But it's Carter, Carter, Carter he's thinking of, Carter he's protecting, Stupid Carter who laughs like the sun and almost always dies. He needs the wolf, but the wolf is now a man, and he gives himself to the beast because that's what pack does.

Before he leaves, he looks back only once.

Carter reaches for him, fingers trembling.

Something cracks in Gavin's chest, and it hurts more than anything he's ever felt before.

Grief, vast and blue, blue, blue.

He thinks, *Stay away. Stay away, Stupid Carter. Don't…don't forget me.*

And then he hears his father's voice in his head.

come, the beast whispers. *come my son i am your pack now i am your alpha*.

Gavin turns away from Carter with the last of his strength.

And then he's gone.

ALL STORIES HAVE AN ENDING

ON AUGUST 18, 2020, WITNESS THEIRS

Brothersong

He said, "*No*."

He said, "Why are you here?"

He said, "What do you *want*?"

I closed my eyes and thought of dying. “To feel like I’m awake.”

In the ruins of Caswell, Maine, Cater Bennett learned the truth of what had been right in front of him the entire time. And then it—he—was gone.

Desperate for answers, Carter takes to the road, leaving family and the safety of his back behind, all in the name of a man he only knows as a feral wolf. But therein lies the danger: wolves are pack animals, and the longer Carter is on his own, the more his mind slips toward the endless void of Omega insanity.

But he pushes on, following the trail left by Gavin.

Gavin, the son of Robert Livingstone. The half-brother of Gordo Livingstone.

What Carter finds will change the course of the wolves forever. Because Gavin’s history with the Bennett pack goes back further than anyone knows, a secret kept hidden by Carter’s father, Thomas Bennett.

And with this knowledge comes a price: the sins of the fathers now rest upon the shoulders of their sons.